

The Empire of the Maharaja, King of the Mountains and Lord of the Isles.

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In the autumn of the year 671 the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim I Tsing¹ sailed from Canton in a Persian ship with the North-East monsoon and in less than twenty days arrived at the country of Fo-she, where he stayed for six months before proceeding to India. Fourteen years later, on his return from India, he stayed there again, this time for four years. All the available evidence points to the conclusion that this Fo-she or Shi-li-fo-she country was Palembang, in Southern Sumatra, and from the 7th century to its conquest by the Javanese of Majapahit about 1377 we get many glimpses of it as a flourishing kingdom of Hindu (and particularly Buddhist) civilization. That much has been common knowledge for a good many years past. Gerini in his *Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia*, pp. 619-30, has compiled a useful list of dates forming an outline sketch of Palembang history during the period above mentioned, and Wilkinson in *Papers on Malay Subjects: History*, Pt. I, pp. 11-4, has also given a brief account of it (omitting, however, any reference to I Tsing and relying on the very doubtfully identified kingdom of Kandali).

Quite recently, however, the importance of Palembang in relation to the whole course of the local history of the Straits before the 14th century has had fresh light thrown upon it. It is no longer as a single kingdom localized in Southern Sumatra that we must regard it, but as an empire which for several centuries had outstations on both sides of the Straits, by means of which it controlled and took toll of the international trade that passed through them. Viewed in that light, the matter becomes vastly more interesting, for it is linked up with the history of Eastern trade-routes in general and in particular with the sea-route between China and the West. In Ptolemy's time (2nd Century A.D.) trade already went through the Straits, though on occasion it availed itself of various land crossings on the isthmus between Indo-China and the Malay Peninsula, in places where that isthmus narrows and there are convenient gaps in the mountain ridge. No doubt, as navigation progressed, the continuous sea-route through the Straits, in spite of the delays involved by its weak and variable winds, became more and more firmly established as the normal one. And so it remained until Vasco da Gama discovered the new route round the Cape of Good Hope, whereupon for a few centuries the trade was diverted to some extent, only to return again into its old channels by reason of the cutting of the Suez Canal.

1 "I-Tsing translated by J. Takakusu," (1896, Clarendon Press, Oxford).

In I Tsing's time Palembang annexed the Malayu country, probably in Central Sumatra somewhere about Kampar or Siak, with a port at which the pilgrim also stayed a while. A century later, there is evidence that Vieng Sa, an inland place south of the Bay of Bandon in what is now Lower Siam and situated about 9° N. lat., was in some way under the control of the "Mahārāja," for that was the dynastic style of the King of Palembang. A Sanskrit inscription set up at Vieng Sa¹ records the erection in the year 775 of certain Buddhist buildings by order of the King of Srīvijaya. This reflects back a ray of light on the *kadatuan Srīvijaya*, the kingdom of Srīvijaya mentioned in the Kota Kapur (Western Bangka) inscription² which is nearly a century older and commemorates an attack on Java. It now seems highly probable that Srīvijaya was not the name of the king who set up that inscription but rather of his kingdom. In the middle of the 9th century begins the series of Arabic writers who make much of the empire of the Mahārāja, which according to them included all the region of the Straits. For the early Arab traders the great emporium was Kalah or Kilah, where there were tin-mines which localize it definitely in the tin-bearing tract of country extending from Southern Tenasserim through the greater part of the Malay Peninsula. Its identification with Kēdah is at least highly probable, for Kēdah is the port which a traveller from the West would first reach and call at. Ibn Khordadbeh, the earliest Arab authority who goes into these matters, says that Kilah was six days' journey from the island of Langkabulus (one of the Nicobars, probably Great Nicobar). It is mentioned about the beginning of the 10th century as a dependency of the Mahārāja, and probably stood in that relation a century or two earlier. It is probably identical with Kie-ch'a (old pronunciation Kada), where I Tsing called on his way to India and whence he sailed in a ship belonging to the king (of Palembang).

But what throws the strongest light on the extent and importance of the empire of Palembang is the record of its relations with the Tamil dynasty of the Cholas in the 11th century. First, in 1005, there is a grant of a village to a Buddhist temple at Nega-patam built by two Palembang kings, father and son. This grant is in Sanskrit and Tamil; in the Sanskrit portion the names of the two kings are given and the second one is styled "king of Katāha and king of Srīvishaya." Their identity as kings of Palembang is clinched by two entries in the Chinese annals of the Sung dynasty which also give their names and mention embassies from them in 1003 and 1008 respectively. In the Tamil text Katāha is called Kidāram. It is almost certainly Kēdah. Some twenty years later the Chola king of that day boasts in his inscriptions of his conquests overseas, resulting in the capture of the king of Kadāram and the taking of a number of places in his empire, including *inter alia* the Nicobars, Lambri (near Achin), Kadāram, Langkasuka (the old

1 'Inscriptions du Siam et de la Péninsule Malaise,' by M. L. Finot in the "Bulletin de la Commission archéologique de l'Indochine, 1910."

2 *J. R. A. S., S. B.*, No. 64.

site in Southern Kēdah), and Srīvishaya itself. Again in 1068 another Chola king claims to have captured Kēdah but restored it to its ruler, and a few years later we find that Palembang has persuaded the Chinese Court that the Mahārāja is the overlord and the Chola his vassal! From this period of conflict ending thus we may perhaps infer that honours were divided, though it does not appear that Palembang retaliated by a genuine strategical offensive in the 11th century, at any rate.

It is not unlikely that the attacks on Ceylon in 1250 and between 1270 and 1275 attributed by the Ceylon chronicles to the "Javaku" emanated from Palembang. Chao Ju Kua, writing about 1225, represents Palembang as having fifteen provinces or dependencies, including Pahang, Trēngganu, Kēlantān, Langkasuka, half a dozen more places less easily identified but of which two have been definitely located in Lower Siam, and five others, namely Palembang, Sunda, Kompai, Lambri, and Ceylon, the last named (like some of the others) sending a yearly tribute.

But before the end of the 13th century the Palembang empire seems to have broken up. Even in 1225 it showed signs of internal decay, for the Chinese author just cited, after enumerating Kompai among the dependencies, devotes a separate chapter to it in which he expressly says: "Formerly it was a dependency of San-fo-ts'i, but after a fight it set up a king of its own." Then there was serious pressure from without. Perhaps we may include herein the Javanese expedition of 1275 to "Malayu," though we do not know precisely which part of Sumatra it was aimed at. There was worse trouble in the extreme North of the Peninsula, where the Malay forces were falling back before the growing Siamese kingdom whose capital was then at Sukhodaya, far away to the North, near the Lao country. The Mon chronicles speak of these conflicts at some date not long before 1280, and the Chinese records say that they had been going on for many years before 1295. The upshot was that the northern outstations of Palembang in the Peninsula were included in Lower Siam. About the same time Islam was making its first and as yet peaceful conquests in Northern Sumatra, and little places like Pērlak, Pasai, and Samudra set up as independent states and made a bid for a share in the trade of the Straits.

Somewhere about the same period, possibly a little earlier, Singapore must also have become independent and begun to take advantage of its unique position. For plainly the command of the Straits so long exercised by Palembang rested not on nature but on force: it was quite off the direct trade-route. So long as by threats of what we should call piracy it could compel trading ships to come into its ports and there pay toll, it did so, even as late as the early part of the 13th century, as Chao Ju Kua tells us. But already in his time it would seem that about a third of the merchants from China put in at Ling-ya-mön (Straits of Linggi, or I think more probably Singapore) before going on to

Palembang. Probably this Ling-ya-mön, wherever it was, was only a dependency and so Palembang got the tolls anyhow. But when the outstations began to drop away, the old monopoly was gone and the Mahārāja lost his hold on the trade which he had controlled and taxed for some six centuries. For why should traders go out of their way, when the short cut lay by Singapore?

Comparing these somewhat scanty historical facts with the legends handed down by tradition and embodied in Malay literature, one is tempted to see in the mythical expedition of Raja Suran down the Malay Peninsula (*Sĕjarah Mĕlayu*, chapt. I) a vague reflection of the Chola raids of the 11th century, while the tales of friendly correspondence between Malay and Indian kings may well be based on half forgotten memories of a state of things that really existed for several centuries. There is evidence enough in Malay titles, place-names, and many other words, of the strong influence which Indian civilization had on Western Indonesia. Knowing something now of the course of history, even if it is merely in rough outline, one can understand why the *Sĕjarah Mĕlayu* makes the kings of Singapore descend from the royal family of Palembang, the great state which played such a leading part for such a long time; and an epithet in the dynastic style of that family throws light on the myth of the origin of the Singapore house. Both in the Vieng Sa inscription and in the earliest of the Chola records above referred to, the Mahārāja is said to be "of the family of the king of the mountains." This, with all the other evidence, establishes the fact that the same dynasty is referred to in both inscriptions and also accounts for what puzzled Mr. Wilkinson (*op. cit.*, p. 11), namely the legend of the appearance of the three princes on Mount Siguntang Mahameru. That is not a national Malay legend but an echo of the dynastic tradition of the Palembang family which claimed to spring from "the king of the mountains." What mountain or mountains the Hindu or Hinduized dynasty of Palembang conceived itself to have come from, we do not know. Possibly it may have been a mountain in India, though the later Malay legend locates it in Southern Sumatra. Nor does it very much matter. But the epithet definitely proves that the Mahārāja of Srīvijaya who set up the inscription at Vieng Sa in what is now lower Siam was head of the state which more than two centuries later was ruled by the kings who built the temple at Negapatam. And that state was I Tsing's Shi-li-fo-she, the Sarbaza or Sribuza of the Arabs, no longer to be read as Srī Bhoja but Srīvijaya, and certainly Palembang.

For these important additions to our knowledge of Malay history we are indebted to an excellent paper by M. G. Cœdès in the *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (1918), Tome XVIII, No. 6, entitled "Le Royaume de Crīvijaya," to which the reader should refer for the details of the evidence and many further particulars. The conclusions arrived at seem irresistible. At the very least, they point to the Mahārāja of Palembang having held

for several centuries a number of "Straits Settlements," the northernmost of which made him for some time a near neighbour of the great Indo-Chinese power of Camboja. In fact a relatively late (probably 12th century) inscription referring to him and apparently executed by his order is in the Cambojan language, but in a script which in those days was common in Western Indonesia and is almost identical with the contemporary script of Burma.

What bearing has all this on the date when the Malays first really colonized the Peninsula? Apart from the few northern settlements actually mentioned, it is hard to say. But it seems reasonable to assume that the Mahārāja garrisoned these with his own people. Kēdah, therefore, may have been the first really Malay (or at any rate Sumatran) settlement in the Peninsula, and there were others beyond it, in the country that is now Siamese. But we hear nothing of settlements in the South of the Peninsula, except Singapore and that at no very early date. This seems to fit in pretty well with the evidence that the North contained fairly civilized Buddhist states, while there is comparatively little trace of civilization in the South in pre-Muhammadan days.

To what period then must we refer the Mon-Khmer influence which is incontestably evidenced by the linguistic characteristics of the "aborigines" of the Peninsula, for instance by the unquestionably Mon numerals of the Southern Sakai (Bēsisi, etc.)? Are we compelled to push it further back than the 7th or 8th century A.D.? Or must some other explanation be invented to account for it? Did the so-called aborigines drift into the Peninsula from Indo-China after the Malay colonization had actually begun? That seems very improbable, but it is difficult to feel positive about the matter; there are still too many unknowns in the history of the Peninsula. It seems certain now that some portions of it, at any rate, fell under Sumatran political influence as early as the 7th or at latest the 8th century. But at first they were merely trading stations, and it does not follow that Malay colonization on a large scale set in immediately. Perhaps some day the veil which shrouds the early history of the Peninsula will be still further lifted. In the meantime we have to thank M. G. Cœdès for the new light he has thrown on a very obscure matter. He has focussed upon it evidence derived from many sources and has added to the subject a new interest.

Postscript.

Since the above was written, Dr. N. J. Krom, formerly head of the Archæological Survey in the Dutch East Indies and now Professor of the Archæology and Ancient History of the Dutch East Indies in the University of Leyden, has contributed some very important and interesting additional facts to the discussion. In his inaugural address of the 3rd December, 1919, he pointed out that the evidence of Javanese inscriptions shows that as early as 778 A.D. the dynasty of "the king of the mountains" was ruling Central Java, and it seems to have continued to do so for about a century, during which period it erected important monu-

ments there. Meanwhile Eastern Java was under another dynasty, which claimed South Indian origin. It would appear that in those early days the Sumatran house was the more powerful. It continued to maintain, or at any rate claim, supremacy over Western Java (Sunda) till about 1200 A.D. There is much reason to believe that its influence on the development of Indian civilization in Java was very great, and that amongst other things it was the means of introducing the Mahayana form of Buddhism (which we know prevailed at Palembang) into Java.

It seems, therefore, that we have to conceive the existence, during the period in question, of two great rival powers in the Archipelago, the one centred in Southern Sumatra, the other in Eastern Java. Until well into the 13th century, the former was the stronger. Then, by degrees, the Javanese power, soon to be centred at Majapahit, gained upon it, and eventually completed its ruin by conquering its capital and many of its outlying possessions and dependencies somewhere about 1377 A.D.

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